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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E
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SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI: SENATOR FEINGOLD DISCUSSES REGION,
SECURITY, AND GOOD GOVERNANCE WITH GODJ

Classified By: Amb. James C. Swan for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) SUMMARY. During a December 18-21 CODEL in Djibouti, Senator Feingold discussed Djibouti, Somalia, and regional concerns with top GODJ and Somalia officials. In meetings with President Guelleh, Foreign Minister Yousseuf, and members of Djibouti's civil society, the Senator focused on the strong U.S.-Djibouti partnership, domestic issues of security, development, and good governance, and wider Horn of Africa developments. In addition, the Senator held a series of meetings in Djibouti on Somalia issues, including with the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS), as well as with leaders from Somaliland and representatives of Somalia civil society and private sector (septel). END SUMMARY.

POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS OF U.S.-DJIBOUTI PARTNERSHIP

2. (C) During separate meetings on December 20, Senator Feingold thanked Djiboutian President Ismail Omar Guelleh and Foreign Minister Mahamoud Ali Yousseuf for Djibouti's strong and "valuable" partnership with the U.S., and for hosting the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) at Camp Lemonier. In response to the Senator's questions about how ordinary Djiboutians viewed the U.S. and the U.S. presence in Djibouti, Guelleh described the population as "friendly and sympathetic" towards the United States. Both Guelleh and Yousseuf said that for the majority of Djiboutians, CJTF-HOA's presence represented positive opportunities for jobs, contracts, expanded contact with Americans, and much-needed civil affairs projects such as wells and schools. Yousseuf was also quick to add that the GODJ and the Djiboutian population appreciated not just CJTF-HOA's civil affairs projects, but all USG support towards meeting Djibouti's "development challenges," notably successful USAID programming. Both Guelleh and Yousseuf said that many Djiboutians, especially those from the educated elite, had disagreed with some recent U.S. foreign policy decisions, notably in Iraq. However, Yousseuf characterized these policy disagreements as a "political circus debate," noting that the general popular sentiment was that the U.S. presence in Djibouti brought with it substantial benefits for the country and its population.

ERITREA-DJIBOUTI BORDER DISPUTE

3. (C) Senator Feingold addressed the ongoing Eritrea-Djibouti border dispute, and offered his sympathy for the loss of Djiboutian forces during fighting in June. President Guelleh told the Senator that while he was eager to see a United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) on the dispute, he was unsure of how much such an UNSCR would truly "constrain" Eritrea, which he said was "still occupying" Djiboutian territory. Guelleh told the Senator that there had previously been "good relations" between Djibouti and Eritrea, and said that he attributed the June flare-up at the border to three factors: 1) Eritrea's misguided perception that the U.S. military presence in Djibouti threatened Eritrea; 2) Eritrean concerns that Djibouti's helpful involvement in orchestrating Djibouti Process talks between Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS) was harmful to Eritrean interests; and 3) Economic rivalry linked to the announcement of an ambitious project to build a bridge between Djibouti and Yemen, to include construction of a new economic hub city at the bridge's terminus in Djibouti in the vicinity of Moulhoulé, near the Djibouti-Eritrea border.

4. (C) Similarly, ForMin Yousseuf agreed that Eritrea might

have been motivated by jealousy over the Port of Djibouti's economic success as Ethiopia's main lifeline to the sea, a false fear that the U.S. was using Djibouti as a "Trojan horse" to conspire with Ethiopia against Eritrea, and a desire to thwart the TFG-ARS Djibouti Process. Youssouf told the Senator that Eritrea needed to accept the idea of "status quo ante," withdraw from the border area, and open a dialogue with Djibouti--either directly, or through a third party. However, Youssouf noted that when the disagreement first surfaced, Eritrea had quickly rebuffed Djibouti's initial attempts to resolve it through dialogue. On the question of the over 73 Eritrean defectors/deserters now in Djiboutian

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custody, Youssouf indicated that the GODJ did not/not plan to return them to Eritrean control. "These people are asylum seekers," he said. "How can we return them when we know they will be killed?" In contrast, he added, Eritrea has denied the existence of any Djiboutian prisoners of war, and has refused access to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

SOMALIA

15. (C) Noting the Senator's planned meetings on Somalia, Guelleh said that he thought the international community was "close to finding a lasting solution for Somalia" through the Djibouti Process, and stressed the need for a continued strong USG commitment--including potential support for state building, security forces, and civil society in Somalia--to avoid another devolution into fighting. The Senator assured Guelleh that he would work to garner additional moral and material support from the USG, and said that he planned to engage with President-Elect Obama's team on this issue.

16. (C) Senator Feingold and ForMin Youssouf also discussed Somalia issues at some length. Youssouf called the latest political developments "very disturbing," and criticized TFG President Yusuf for "creating more confusion in the political process" through his dispute with TFG PM Nur Adde. The GODJ had met with Prime Minister Nur Adde the previous day, and with President Yusuf last week, ForMin Youssouf said, and had felt that President Yusuf's message had been simply, "it's me--or chaos in Somalia." ForMin Youssouf told the Senator that the goal would now be to "contain" Yusuf from becoming an "obstacle," and correctly predicted that the emergency December 21 Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) ministerial would turn Kenya's bilateral decision to impose sanctions on President Yusuf into a collective IGAD action. Noting that this was a "critical time" for IGAD countries, Youssouf also said that despite some past disagreements over Somalia policy, Djibouti and Ethiopia were now generally in "100%" agreement on foreign policy issues.

17. (C) On the GODJ's role in the Djibouti Process, Youssouf said that Djibouti's majority ethnic Somali population gave the GODJ insight into inter-Somalia politics, while Djibouti's small, unthreatening size led many to consider the GODJ as "more neutral" than other parties. Currently, Youssouf said, the GODJ was trying to "sensitize the international community" on the urgent need to bolster Somali security forces on the ground to avoid a potential security vacuum in the wake of an Ethiopian withdrawal. Youssouf said that he thought Somali security forces would be able to control the security situation, but only if Ethiopia withdrew in an "organized way." In addition, Youssouf said, the international community might not be responding as easily as might be desired, perhaps because of perception that the political process was not moving forward as quickly as it should.

SOMALILAND AND PUNTLAND:
RECOGNITION VS. REGIONAL INTEGRATION

18. (C) In discussing President Yusuf, President Guelleh told the Senator that he was concerned that Yusuf might "create a new secession of the Puntland region." Responding to the Senator's question about Djibouti's relationship with Somaliland, Guelleh said that although Djiboutians and Somalilanders were "part of the same family" and Somaliland had consistently pressed Djibouti to be the first to recognize Somaliland as an independent state, he had "told them many times that it would be very difficult to defend the idea of an independent Somaliland within the African Union (AU) or the UN." President Guelleh also noted the potential incompatibility of a fragmented Somalia with Djibouti's vision of greater regional integration. Still, Guelleh told the Senator, recognition remained a "sensitive question," as Somalilanders "cannot imagine any other solution." When asked by the Senator why Djibouti had such strong reservations about Somaliland independence, ForMin Youssouf said that despite warming Djibouti-Somaliland trade

relations, regional experience had led the GODJ to believe that a "balkanized" Somalia could provoke instability, and retard efforts to deepen regional economic cooperation.

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THREATS IN THE REGION:
TERRORISM AND PIRACY

19. (C) Senator Feingold asked President Guelleh and ForMin Youssouf to comment on what they perceived as the most important threats to security in the region. On terrorist threats, President Guelleh said that radicalism had been brought to the region by Saudi and Sudanese elements, and that Somali culture was traditionally hostile to suicide bombings and extremist influences. ForMin Youssouf also characterized terrorism in Somalia as "circumstantial," and said that Al-Shabaab was simply "surfing a wave" of opportunity created by the Ethiopian presence. Nevertheless, Youssouf agreed with the Senator that "desperation" could lead people to use terrorist tactics, and said that Djibouti had strengthened its security posture following the October terrorist attacks in Somaliland and Puntland.

10. (C) On the ongoing threat of piracy off the coast of Somalia, Guelleh told the Senator that he appreciated continued high level dialogue with the USG on the issue, and also welcomed recent greater engagement from the European Union. ForMin Youssouf emphasized the impossibility of decoupling piracy from the instability on land in Somalia. "Chaos," he said, "can lead to all kinds of anachronistic phenomena, such as piracy or even slavery." Most of the pirates, Youssouf said, were drawn from former naval forces, with some converted fishermen thrown in, and had "nothing to do with Al-Shabaab."

FOSTERING GOOD GOVERNANCE

11. (C) During his visit, Senator Feingold discussed issues of good governance, transparency, and human rights with President Guelleh, Foreign Minister Youssouf, and members of civil society:

---POLITICAL SPACE: President Guelleh told the Senator that the opposition had "systematically refused to participate in any election" for some time. However, Guelleh also explained that his own ruling coalition, the Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP), already represented an alliance of several parties, including former rebel and opposition leaders. The existence of this strong coalition, Guelleh said, weakened the remaining opposition.

--PRESS FREEDOM: In response to the Senator's concerns about the paucity of independent press outlets in Djibouti, Guelleh responded that Djibouti was a small oral society which valued "free speech more than free writing" and preferred to exercise "liberty of expression" through debates in coffee shops rather than through formal news sources. Guelleh also said that the main factor inhibiting the growth of independent press was the absence of a lucrative advertising and distribution base.

--HUMAN RIGHTS AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS: President Guelleh described traditional "tolerance" as Djibouti's greatest asset, pointing out that there were no political detainees, no death penalty in use, and no religious persecution. President Guelleh also underscored the GODJ's current involvement in political and economic life, noting that he felt the "Arab world is suffering from the lack of women's participation."

--CORRUPTION: Senator Feingold asked President Guelleh how the GODJ was tackling issues of corruption. While noting that bribery was not traditionally accepted in nomadic Djiboutian culture, Guelleh said that addressing corruption remained a top priority for his government. If not aggressively deterred, Guelleh said, corruption could become a "gangrene" that might deter foreign direct investment.

--NO THIRD TERM: When asked by the Senator if he were considering amending Djibouti's constitution to run for third term in office, President Guelleh said that he was "not thinking about it myself." He told the Senator that he agreed with the principle of a two-term limit, remarking that "what a politician can contribute to the population in twelve years of efforts is more than enough--after that it will become routine"

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--CIVIL SOCIETY ROUNDTABLE: Senator Feingold's questions

engendered a lively debate among diverse participants at a December 21 roundtable on Civil Society, Good Governance, and the Private Sector. Issues discussed included press freedom, advancement of women, judicial independence, opposition participation, perceptions of the U.S., and human rights. Most participants supported the GODJ's perspective on freedom of the press and civil society.

PRESS COVERAGE

¶12. (U) Local press enthusiastically covered Senator Feingold's meetings with GODJ and Somalia officials. Photographs and stories on the Senator's meetings nearly filled the first three pages of the December 22 edition of "La Nation," the national French language newspaper, and coverage of the Senator's meeting with President Guelleh ran as the lead item in Radio Television Djibouti's nightly news broadcast December 20.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Senior GODJ officials were keen to meet with the Chairman of the Africa Subcommittee, and Senator Feingold's visit allowed both for a frank exchange of views with the GODJ on regional issues, and a prime opportunity to deepen discussions on domestic questions of good governance.

¶14. (U) Senator Feingold cleared this cable.

SWAN